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Chairwoman Mikulski Praises Bipartisan Work on Defense Bill, Emphasizes Importance of Resetting the Military and Supporting Veterans and Military Families in Opening Remarks at Full Committee Markup of FY14 Defense Bill

WASHINGTON – U.S. Senator Barbara A. Mikulski (D-Md.), Chairwoman of the Appropriations Committee, emphasized the importance of resetting our military as the war winds down, supporting our veterans and military families, and providing oversight and accountability at today's Full Committee markup of the fiscal year 2014 Defense bill. The following are Chairwoman Mikulski's remarks, as prepared for delivery:

"I am pleased to hold this meeting to mark up the fiscal year 2014 bill for the Department of Defense. I'm so proud of the work done by Senator Durbin and Senator Cochran on the largest appropriations bill. This bill is nearly \$600 billion in total, including war funding. That's more than half of all proposed discretionary spending for fiscal year 2014.

"Senators Durbin and Cochran have followed the tradition of our beloved former Chairmen, Senators Inouye and Stevens, by working side-by-side as bipartisan partners to resource the critical missions of the Department of Defense (DoD). As the war winds down I applaud their emphasis on the future readiness of our troops, support for our veterans and military families, and oversight and accountability.

"Before I review the content of their bill, I want to review the great progress we've made in this Committee. I want to compliment all the members of this Committee on their diligent, hard work. Just about four months ago we passed our appropriations for fiscal year 2013, and we received the President's fiscal year 2014 budget request. Since then, our Subcommittees have held 46 hearings and numerous oversight briefings with agencies, inspectors general, and GAO.

"After today's markup we will have reported 11 of our 12 bills. The majority of our bills were reported with strong bipartisan support, and we expect the Defense bill to be bipartisan too. Through our work together, we've shown that we can and we do listen to one another, value each others' input, and we are able to disagree without being disagreeable. We've shown that we share the same goal of returning the appropriations process to regular order. I thank all our Members and the staff for their hard work to bring us this far.

"So, what's next -- how do we move forward? Well, we need a topline, so we can get to a bottom line. We have marked up our bills to a topline of \$1.058 trillion, the level in the American Taxpayer Relief Act, which was approved by the Senate by a vote of 89-8. We assume that sequester will be replaced with a balanced solution of revenues and smart cuts. The House has marked up its bills to a topline of \$967 billion. They assume that sequester will continue, and they put a moat around defense so that all \$91 billion in cuts come out of domestic funding bills.

"The effects of sequester are being felt all around the Nation. Children will be turned away from Head Start. Seniors won't get the Meals on Wheels they rely on. NIH will award 700 fewer grants – delaying medical research. For DoD, the effects have been the most obvious --650,000 civilian personnel furloughs, training that isn't happening, ships that aren't steaming, planes that aren't flying.

"How do we fix sequester? We need a deal to replace it. Those who support \$967 billion want to make sequester the 'new normal.' They say 'we must follow the law' and sequester is the law. This Committee's spending allocations assert that sequester will be replaced with a balanced solution to the deficit problem. That will be decided in a conference on the Budget Resolution. However, six Senators have objected to a conference on the Budget Resolution. But I have been determined that this Committee will not be undermined by this obstructionism. While we wait for the Budget Committee to be able to do its job, we will continue to do our job.

"This isn't a disagreement about whether we should have across the board cuts. Nobody thinks across the board cuts are smart. This is a disagreement about how much we will invest in America -- our infrastructure, our people, our national security. And I remind my colleagues that under the Ryan budget there would be a \$54 billion, a 10 percent across the board cut, to defense program. These are cuts that the Senate plan would avoid.

"Senators Durbin and Cochran will give detailed presentations about their bill, but I want to highlight several critical accomplishments. First, the bill focuses on supporting our veterans. It focuses on DoD's efforts to help the VA reduce the claims backlog. Second, as the war winds down and the military transitions to fewer deployments, the bill emphasizes repairing and replacing worn equipment, so our troops and our national guard are ready for the future. Third, I am proud of the bill's focus on oversight and accountability. Senators Durbin and Cochran relied on the advice of the Inspector General and the GAO, in order to be smarter with the taxpayers' money.

"The problem of the veterans claims backlog was and is shameful. So I want to thank Secretary Hagel for getting personally involved, he committed to leaving no stone unturned, until the problem is solved. And I note that since our meeting with Secretaries Hagel and Shinseki the backlog of claims that are older than two years has shrunk from nearly 24,000 to 1,800 - a stunning accomplishment.

"The Defense bill provides additional resources so DoD can continue to help the VA by converting records to electronic format while at the same time keeping a watchful eye on technology expenditures. I'm really proud of this progress and I thank Senators Durbin and Cochran, from the Defense Subcommittee, and Senators Johnson and Kirk, from the Milcon-VA Subcommittee, for working together across Subcommittees to solve this problem.

"Specifically, the Defense bill adds \$3.6 million to accelerate DoD's program that scans and provides electronic records to the VA, so all records will be electronic by end of 2013, instead of January 2015. The bill creates a central clearinghouse for the Guard and Reserve, at a time when 43 percent of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans are Guard or Reserve, their records are the most difficult to find and the most difficult to transfer to the VA. This will remove one more hurdle for record transfer.

"The bill directs the DoD Inspector General to work with the VA Inspector General to recommend further efficiencies to speed record transfer process, and to report to Congress on their findings, thus helping us hold DoD and VA accountable. The Defense bill also keeps a watchful eye on the Integrated Electronic Health Record (iEHR) as VA and DoD use two different systems to produce health records that can communicate with one another. The bill withholds 75 percent of funds for DoD's system until DoD and the VA provide an expenditure plan and a long-term roadmap for the project, to ensure that DoD and VA systems can talk to each other successfully.

"I'm also proud of what the Defense bill does to protect our nation from cyber attacks. Earlier this year, I held our first Full Committee hearing on cybersecurity. I focused on cutting across Subcommittees and on how the budget protects the American people from cyber threats. We must protect our domains: dot-mil, dot-gov, and dot-com. We must ensure the wise use of taxpayer dollars to prevent hackers, nation states, and criminals from stealing identities and intellectual property, and from sabotaging online commerce and critical infrastructure. We examined the President's request of over \$13 billion for cybersecurity government-wide, including over \$9 billion in the Defense Bill, and I'm proud that this Committee met those obligations.

"I'm not just the Full Committee Chairwoman, I'm also the Senator for Maryland. I'm so pleased this Defense bill supports the crucial missions of Maryland's military installations, from Aberdeen to Andrews Air Force Base, from Indian Head to Naval Air Station Patuxent River, from Ft. Meade to Ft. Detrick to Walter Reed. I'm so proud of the men and women at these Maryland facilities who work tirelessly to research, develop, test, and evaluate innovations that will change the battlefield. From more effective protective gear and helmets for our troops to research on medical practices and treatments, these men and women create, innovate and collaborate for those on the battlefield. They deserve Nobel prizes for their work, not furlough slips.

"As we markup today, the Transportation-Housing bill is on the Senate floor. I'm so proud of the bipartisan vote of 73-26 to allow us to proceed to that important bill. That vote was a symbol of our shared desire to break through gridlock and to get to work for the American people. I hope we can finish the bill this week.

"By marking up our 11th appropriations bill, we continue to show we are able to work together in a bipartisan way to move our bills forward in order to move America forward. Our cooperation and collegiality in this Committee and our willingness to really listen to each other gives me optimism that we can, and we will, work together to overcome our budget impasse. I look forward to moving this important Defense bill to the full Senate."

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